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ABSTRACT

In an effort to help make products safer and to reduce product-related injuries, the Consumer Product Safety Commission relies heavily on consumer participation. To establish regulations, it utilizes the following: (1) an "Offeror" regulation whereby groups can offer to manage the safety standards development process; (2) a consumer roster which contains the names of individuals interested in participating in standards development; (3) public hearings and meetings; (4) inclusion of more consumer representatives on advisory boards; (5) the consumer deputy program which assists in surveillance activities; and (6) issuance of safety rules on specific products by consumer petition. To collect information concerning injuries, the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS) is the major data source. Information also is provided by: (1) a network of telecommunications terminals in hospitals; (2) in-depth studies in selected cases; (3) doctor's office reports; (4) death certificates; and (5) the National Health Interview Survey. To disseminate the information on product safety, public service announcements are sent to radio and television stations, publications are distributed, and specialized information requests are answered by researchers. (EMH)

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A Government Agency's Program for Collection and Dissemination of Information

Introduction

The Consumer Product Safety Commission has been provided with unique and far reaching authority aimed at protection of the public against unreasonable risks of injury associated with consumer products. Implementation of this authority involves complex decisions concerning the acceptable level of risk associated with consumer products and the environmental and economic consequences--to the consumer, the industry, and the economy as a whole--of actions taken to reduce the risk of injury.

The Commission has adopted a policy of achieving that degree of regulation that represents a balance between safety in consumer products and the cost associated with achieving the desired level of safety. This approach entails seeking maximum participation by consumers and industry in the decision-making process. Maximum participation requires that the Commission maintain an active information program to assure communication with the public.

In addition, the Commission relies heavily on information and education programs since some hazards and hazardous products will not be amenable to elimination by establishment of a standard. In such cases information and education efforts can be utilized to influence consumer

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behavior and to assist consumers in evaluating the comparative safety of these products.

The Commission, in its role as a "producer" of information, employs a variety of disseminating techniques, which not only increases the amount of information made available to the consumer, but which addresses the special needs of selected groups of consumers.

Consumer Involvement in Product Safety

To assure communication with the public, the Commission involves the consumer directly in the activities of the Commission. The Commission believes that it can best determine the necessary degree of safety associated with any consumer product with the assistance of the public. On May 7, 1974, after a substantial amount of public participation, the Commission issued its final "offeror" regulation under Section 7 of the Consumer Product Safety Act. That section authorizes procedures whereby interested parties can assist the Commission in developing safety standards to remedy unreasonable hazards in consumer products. Any person or group meeting the basic requirements under Section 7 may qualify as an offeror. The Commission's offeror regulations were designed to encourage a variety of groups, including consumer and consumer organizations, to offer to manage the standards development process. By ensuring that a variety of groups representing different interests have the opportunity to manage the development of various standards, the Commission hopes to ensure the issuance of the best possible standards. In addition, by building competition into the

offeror system, the Commission anticipates that there will be an increase in the quality of each of the individual offers, particularly as to the diligence with which all offerors will seek out and consider points of view different from their own during the development process.

To facilitate, encourage, and assure meaningful consumer representation, the Commission has instituted a "consumer roster." This roster contains the names of individuals interested in participating in the development of standards. Many are scientists, engineers, physicians or other professionally or technically trained consumers. All persons on the list receive copies of Federal Register notices, news releases and other relevant materials regarding Commission standards development activities in areas of their expressed interest. Where appropriate, the Commission may agree to contribute to certain costs of a volunteer's participation. There are approximately 4,000 names on the roster with new names being added continually. Making this list available should help to alleviate the difficulties standards organizations appear to have in locating interested qualified persons who are willing to join in standards development activities.

Another mechanism which the Commission has for public participation is the use of public hearings and meetings. The Commission has held public hearings and meetings announced in the Federal Register on such varying subjects as the proposed offeror rules, television sets, children's sleepwear, aerosols, aluminum wire, and sampling plans.

In order to provide for more consumer representation on its advisory committees, the membership of the National Advisory Committee for the Flammable Fabrics Act was revise to consist of 10 representatives of the consuming public and 20 representatives of manufacturers and distributors.

Similarly, the membership of the Technical Advisory Committee on Poison Prevention Packaging was revised to include to two government representatives required by law, eight consumer representatives and eight representatives of manufacturing categories. The Commission sought nominees for these committees, as it did for its Product Safety Advisory Council, through nation-wide public invitation and without consideration of political affiliation.

The Consumer Deputy Program is another way consumers can participate. From students to retirees, consumer deputies are fanning out across the country to help assure banned products are off the retailer's shelves and to assist the Commission in its surveillance activities.

Consumers are also petitioning the Commission to issue safety rules on specific products. For example, one woman, a schoolteacher, petitioned the Commission to issue a safety rule for playground equipment. The Commission granted her petition to promulgate a safety standard to help prevent some very serious injuries to children.

Hazard Identification

To meet its statutory responsibilities, the Commission must have a comprehensive base of information on injuries associated with consumer products. This information can then be used to evaluate the degree of hazard associated with various products. This process of "information collection" and "hazard assessment" provides an essential input to the planning process and permits a rational approach to the development of appropriate strategies for hazard and injury reduction.

Injuries associated with consumer products occur in widely scattered areas of the country; they may lead to death, disability or only minor inconvenience; they are treated in hospitals, doctors' offices, or in the home. Because of this multiplicity of places of occurrence of injuries, types of injuries, and sources of treatment, there is currently no single collection system that encompasses data on all product-related injuries and deaths. Hence, the Commission must utilize information from many sources to develop the data bases necessary to support the conduct of a rational product safety regulation program. The National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS) is the major data base activity of the Commission.

NEISS utilizes a network of telecommunications terminals located at 119 hospitals for the purpose of daily reporting coded product-related injury data from the hospitals' emergency treatment departments. Through the operation of NEISS, the Commission is able to obtain statistically valid sampling of product-related injuries treated

daily in the nation's hospitals, from which nation-wide estimates can be extrapolated.

A total of 339,419 injury cases were reported through NEISS during fiscal year 1975. A total of 1,088,422 cases have been reported since 1972 and are now included in the NEISS data base. The 1975 total represents a 7 percent increase over the number reported in 1974.

A more comprehensive level of data collection and analysis is conducted by the Commission in selected cases to determine how products were involved in accidents, and the course of events which resulted in injury. This in-depth investigatory function is essential to understanding the hazard and initiating corrective action.

In addition, a survey is being taken to measure the number and type of product injury cases being treated in physician's offices. Death certificates covering product-related deaths are being provided to the Commission by nearly all states. The Commission also is working with the National Center for Health Statistics to collect product injury data through the National Household Interview Survey.

The hazard identification program's data resources are coordinated and made available through their centralization in the National Injury Information Clearinghouse. Over 30,000 in-depth investigations and some 75,000 death certificates together with various tabulations, indexes and special reports form the basic resource files in the Clearinghouse.

The bulk of these efforts supported the Commission's work in Hazard Assessment and Regulatory Development. Extensive compilations of data were prepared for each analysis or standard undertaken. Injury data also formed the basis for many of the information campaigns mounted by the agency. A technical publication of statistical compilations of NEISS data, NEISS News, is also distributed by the Clearinghouse.

In addition to the collection of information on product injuries, information is also collected on hazards and potential hazards of consumer products. The Commission's scientific and technical staff need information on product manufacturers, product sample analyses, product ingredients, and chemical structure, toxicity, carcinogenticity, etc. To meet these needs, the Commission has developed several computer data bases such as the Laboratory Analysis Monitoring System. This system provides analysis data on consumer products which are analyzed in the Commission's laboratories. This information can be entered in and retrieved from the computer via remote terminals operated by the laboratory staffs in the five laboratories.

Information Dissemination

The Commission's information and education programs are focused on selected product categories. Each of these categories contain a number of products related by use or accident pattern that rank high on the Hazard Index (compiled from NEISS data).

In implementing these product oriented programs the Commission employs many different techniques: public service announcements are sent to radio and television stations; publications are distributed through area offices, information centers, directly to consumers upon request, and through the Consumer Information Center of the General Services Administration. In addition, requests for specialized information are answered by researchers.

Product safety information is distributed to national organizations, trade associations, national civic, professional, and religious groups, and educational institutions. The Commission also exhibits product safety displays at numerous state and national conventions, impacting 60,000 to 100,000 people a year.

Fact Sheets have been prepared on 78 products or hazard areas in response to consumer requests for information and over seven million were printed last year. Fifteen thousand consumer complaints and inquiries were answered. The national toll-free consumer "hotline" offers callers both a source of information about the Commission and product safety and also an opportunity to complain about product-related injuries and potentially hazardous products. Calls to the hotline currently average 350 per day.

The Bethesda Office Information Center began operations in November 1974. Designed to provide an office where the public may visit and

make inquiries and complaints, it is visited by Commission employees, consumers, representatives of trade associations, and other government agency employees. More than 500 packets of information materials have been requested from the center.

The Information Center also monitors 14 Information Centers in the area offices and 14 portable exhibits for use in area office presentations.

In addition, radio spots are distributed to all of the approximately 6,300 radio stations, English and Spanish, in the 50 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Television spots are sent to approximately 655 commercial television stations in the 50 states and Puerto Rico. In addition, both radio and television spots are distributed to American military installations overseas and to ships at sea through the Armed Forces Radio and Television Services. Films are distributed through a commerical film service which has 26 regional offices.

The Commission has established cooperative programs with the 50 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands; each of these governments has designated a individual and state agency as liaison to the Commission. The states are called upon for voluntary cooperation on occasion. In the case of the banning order on spray adhesives in 1973, the state's help was solicited in visiting retail stores. State's inspectors are also used under contract to supplement the Commission's investigatory force. They conduct inspections of firms and collect samples of possible violative products for further testing by the Commission's laboratories.

It is apparent, by the above cited examples, that the Commission relies heavily on consumer participation in all levels of their activities to help establish regulations, identify hazards and to disseminate information on product safety. Consumer groups, consumer deputies, state and local governments, educators in our school systems--all of these groups are used to help make products safer and reduce injuries.